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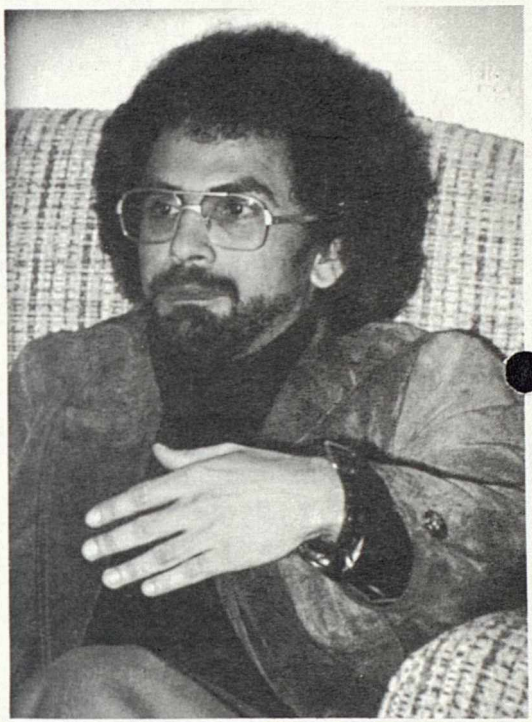
"The War Is a Tremendous School for Everyone"



LSM

Interview with Jose Ramos Horta of FRETILIN

In 1970 a thin young man with a bushy head of hair impulsively rose to speak at a large party in Dili, capital of East Timor. The Eastern part of the island was then controlled by the Portuguese whose dreaded secret police, the PIDE, had informants everywhere. In a long, rambling speech, Jose Ramos-Horta denounced Portuguese rule and predicted that East Timor would soon have a liberation movement like those in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Horta was slightly drunk and so he did not notice the steady stream of people leaving until he was suddenly aware that he was speaking to an empty room.

The fears of the party-going East Timorese were well-founded. The day after the party Horta was called in by the PIDE who had a transcript of his remarks. Horta was exiled for two years in Mozambique.

Despite the PIDE, Horta and his comrades built a liberation movement. Starting as a discussion group, they formed the Association of Social Democrats of Timor (ASDT) of which Horta was Secretary-General. The ASDT began by organizing strikes and sending Horta abroad to seek

international support for independence from Portugal. Horta's activities led to a second exile order but before he had time to leave, the 1974 Portuguese coup intervened and dealt a death blow to Portuguese colonialism.

In September 1974 the ASDT became FRETILIN and rapidly won the support of the East Timorese people with its firm stand for independence. On November 28, 1975, FRETILIN declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of East Timor. Jose Ramos-Horta became one of three Central Committee representatives functioning outside the country. Today he serves as FRETILIN's permanent United Nations representative.

LSM interviewed Jose Ramos-Horta during a visit to the West Coast in February 1978. Jose is unafraid to speak and act on his convictions but when he does speak it is with a modesty and lack of ego rarely encountered in the United States.

Horta's father was a Portuguese democrat deported to Timor in the 1930's. Jose's Timorese mother belongs to the Mambai ethnic group which has resisted Portuguese domination for almost 500 years. Jose grew up among the peasants in the mountains near Dili.

At the age of 14, Horta chose his career; he became a journalist with the Portuguese government newspaper. After his return from exile in 1972, he went to work for the government radio station but was fired because of his Timorese accent. In frustration he wrote an article, "Open Letter to My Brother Maubere," which closed: "Maubere, my brother, the sun is rising; it's time to get up."

Fretilin's Unique Phiilosopny

LSM: WHAT IS MAUBERISM?

HORTA: Among the Mambai people of East Timor individuals have just one personal name of which the most common is Maubere. The Mambai are the largest ethnic group in the country, some 80,000 people spread throughout the central highlands. This area has been a center of traditional resistance to colonial domination for centuries. The culture, tradition, and religion of the Mambai people are uninfluenced by the Portuguese. Because the Mambai opposed all forms of cultural domination, the urban elite called them stubborn and ignorant.

Because the name Maubere is so common, the Dili elite began to call everybody who was ignorant and poor, "Maubere." The name became an insult. For instance, if I, an educated man from Dili, did something wrong, my boss would say, "You are Maubere."

But who are the Maubere people? They are the peasants who constitute 95% of the East Timorese population. They are those who cannot read and write. They are those with no access to medical assistance, those who suffer from malnutrition. They are exploited by the coffee plantation owners, by the cattle ranchers, by the government,

which forced them to work building roads, bridges, and houses without pay. They were forced to pay annual taxes which did not benefit them or help develop the countryside.

We of FRETILIN thought that a genuine East Timorese liberation movement must respond to these problems felt in the flesh, in the daily lives of the Maubere people. In order to mobilize the people, we had to work out a philosophy, a theory that they could easily understand.

If we talked in terms of complicated Marxist-Leninist theories, they would not understand.

People do not fight for empty slogans:

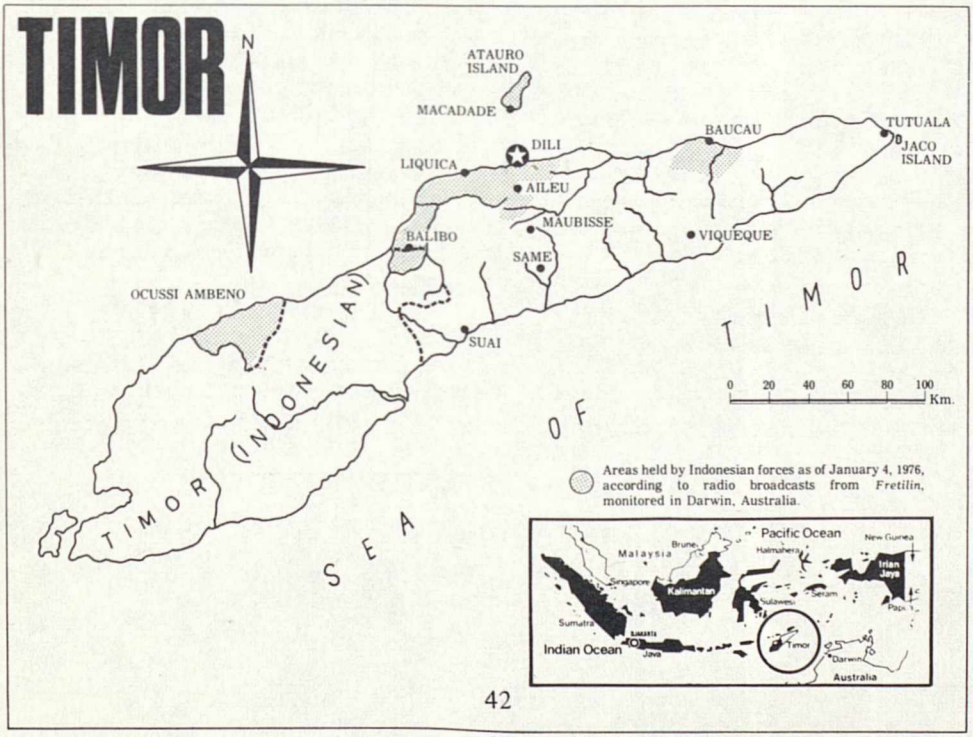
They fight to improve life in their villages.

Our people want revolution, but people do not fight for empty slogans. They fight to improve life in their villages. They want schools where their children can learn to read and write. They want medical assistance, clean water, better housing.

Mauberism, then, according to our definition, is social, cultural, economic development of the countryside with strict adherence to the traditional cultural values of the people. It may sound very simple to sophisticated Western theoreticians, but from Mauberism we can go on to explain complicated economic matters.

Mauberism Means Socialism

We say that the Maubere suffer; they are hungry and lack



education. We must explain why, that it is the result of a decadent, colonial, capitalist system. So Mauberism cannot tolerate a colonial, capitalist system which is based on private ownership of land, of enormous herds of cattle, of coffee plantations, and so on.

In order to solve the problems of hunger and inequality in East Timorese society and respond to the aspirations of the Maubere people, these fundamental steps must be taken: expropriation of private ownership of cattle, of land, of every source of wealth in East Timor and their redistribution throughout the country.

And how will we redistribute them? You get a buffalo; you eat it for a month but what then? We have to have a plan, a substitute for the existing system. Property must be redistributed to the villages, but the people must be organized to produce and increase with it. So we establish joint ownership of land and cattle and cooperative production.

LSM: HOW DO YOUR COOPERATIVES COMPARE WITH TRADITIONAL METHODS OF FARMING?

[redacted]RTA: Cooperatives are not new. For centuries people worked together in the traditional way which included common ownership of land. No individual owned land in a village.

There was one exception, in the region near Viqueque, where in the past fifty years the traditional joint ownership of land was interrupted by the establishment of coffee plantations and the influx of Portuguese settlres who took over the land and disrupted the lives of the people.

We still have some difficulties in solving this problem near Viqueque. A very strong individualistic feeling persists; everyone wants their own piece of land, their own crop.

This is a very rich area, well-developed with good fields; it could completely feed East Timor. It is also strongly Catholic with some feudal relations. Chiefs were very powerful there. For this reason the Apodeti party* had some influence.

FRETILIN's solution was to establish cooperatives in the areas surrounding Viqueque. Slowly the people of the region saw the benefits. Before, the great majority of the people had not benefited from the wealth of the area. Through the peasants' experiences, the situation slowly changed.

The issues quickly clarified when the landlords supported the Indonesian occupation. We still have some problems in Viqueque, but Mauberism now extends to most of East Timor.

Timorese Women's Liberation

LSM: WITHIN THAT PHILOSOPHY, HOW DO YOU STRUGGLE WITH NEGATIVE

*Apodeti, led by a former World War II collaborator with the Japanese, is a pro-Indonesian party. It has failed to win much support in East Timor.

ASPECTS OF TRADITION?

HORTA: The principal negative aspect of tradition is the role of women. Throughout East Timor, women had a very important role in production; but they had no control of production, profit, or income.

Women were considered double slaves: slaves of the settlers, the colonial power, and slaves of the men, their own husbands and other relatives. They had to look after children and cook and during the day they also went to the fields to work. Men worked in the fields too but that was all they did. It was a frequent sight to see a woman with a child on her back bent over the ground planting or weeding. Women had no voice in the decision-making process in villages, in solving problems, in elections.

Women were considered double slaves:
Slaves of the settlers and slaves
of their own husbands.

How were we to solve this problem? In peaceful times, many years of political education would be required to make men realize that women are human beings who must have an equal share in the political process, in the economic and social sphere, and so on.

The war is a tremendous school for everyone. In our two years of fighting there are already valiant women, heroines of the armed struggle.

Women run most of our schools. Since the war started, the illiteracy rate has been lowered from 95% to 70%. Women also participate in campaigns of health, hygiene, and nutrition.

Women are especially active in fighting. Even before the Central Committee decided to set up a women's army, 100 women near the border went to a representative of the Central Committee in the region and demanded weapons. They said: "We do not need training. We just want weapons." Their first operation was successful; they captured the first Indonesian soldiers in that region. Now there are about 3,000 women fighters with their own officers.

Of the 519 members of our People's Congess, about 230 women were elected. In the Central Committee, 30 of the 67 members are women. In the near future we will have even more women cadres because we have a lot of women students abroad in Portugal and Southeast Asia.

LSM: HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF EAST TIMORESE WOMEN AND MEN TO THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN NORTH AMERICA?

HORTA: The struggle for women's liberation in capitalist countries, the United States, is much more difficult than the struggle in East Timor. For instance, what are the priorities here? Equal pay, equal opportunities for jobs, problems of abortion, divorce: these things do not exist in East Timor.

In East Timor we don't have

the complexity of the capitalist system. Colonialism has been dismantled, broken up by the war. We know our enemies and our friends; the situation is clear-cut. So it's very difficult to compare. Women make up about 55% of East Timor's population. And it's a small country so it's easier to solve such problems.

LSM: SOMETIMES GAINS MADE BY WOMEN DURING THE ARMED STRUGGLE ARE ERODED LATER. HOW DEEPLY [illegible]OTED ARE THESE CHANGES?

HORTA: During the armed struggle, the women can impose themselves by force of arms. Not that they threaten to shoot the men; they have weapons and are also defending the country. So men are forced by reality to learn to respect them and to give them equal voice in political affairs.

If during the armed struggle there had not been continuous parallel political education, there might be setbacks after the war. It is always easier to solve problems when everybody is concentrating on the enemy.

After the armed struggle a lot of problems will surface again. There will be crises over ideology, political line, the course of economic development, emphasis, and this question of men/women's relationship will inevitably come out.

So long as class contradictions persist, there will be class conflict and there will certainly be conflict over the question of women's emancipa-

A Woman Versus a Chief

The enclave of Oecusse is a FRETILIN stronghold. The other parties had only a half dozen followers. But the chief was very powerful. He was strongly backed by the Portuguese and had a lot of support from the Indonesians. Nobody dared expose him as a feudalist or a corrupt leader.

One day in March 1975, we held a big rally in Oecusse attended by several thousand people. A twenty-four year old woman took the floor. She was illiterate. Nobody knew where she was from but she was known in the village as a prostitute.

She spoke for about two hours denouncing the chief. She explained how the people of Oecusse were exploited. They had to grow rice and give 70% to the chief. She told them that she herself had been raped by the chief.

When she was through, the people marched to the Portuguese headquarters and demanded the replacement of the chief. The Portuguese had to fly in paratroops from Dili.

Later the chief was replaced; they elected a new one. But if it hadn't been for that single woman, the people would not have been mobilized. They were aware of their suffering. But it was necessary for somebody from their own ranks, a peasant, a woman, to articulate for them what they felt.

- Jose Ramos-Horta

tion. This conflict can be finally solved only when the question of class is solved. Some setbacks are expected, but there is no way we will return to the old ways.

Political Education

LSM: HOW DOES FRETILIN CONDUCT POLITICAL EDUCATION?

HORTA: In each of the over 400 villages in East Timor, someone leads a dynamization cell. Political education occurs every day through discussions of texts distributed by FRETILIN's political committee on various issues: agriculture, health, the role of the army, women. These are short texts, a page or so, written in very simple language.

We have a weekly newspaper, *East Timor*, printed in the countryside. We have complete printing facilities which we stole from the Portuguese. Some regional committees have mimeo machines to produce daily bulletins. Since the illiteracy rate is still high, the political commissar reads the newspaper aloud in the villages and discusses its contents. Our papers are printed in Tetum and Portuguese.

Our best means of political education is radio. Radio Maubere broadcasts three times a week. We have a broadcast in English for Australia and local broadcasts in Tetum and several other dialects such as Mambai. We also have radio programs in the Indonesian language aimed at West Timor and at Indonesian soldiers.

Learning to read and write

On our radio programs we not only have political education but also information about health, short programs to teach people the importance of keeping clean, how to prevent malaria and other diseases, how to look after babies.

We also have what we call revolutionary brigades, groups of five to sixty young men and women, mainly high school students, twelve to eighteen years old, who conduct political education, work with villagers in the fields, and help them build

schools and houses. This is one way of overcoming the differences between peasants and students.

Not only students do this. Our president, Nicolau Lobato, along with our other leaders, is all over the country working barefoot in the ricefields alongside the peasants.

The President works barefoot in the ricefields with the peasants.

Even after liberation, it is FRETILIN's program that, once a year, our president will have to travel around the country to live as the peasants live. He must not sit in a palace in the capital and forget that there are peasants in the countryside who fought for independence but still go barefoot. The cadres, members of the Central Committee, will do the same.

Our program also states that we will never have salaries for members of the Central Committee and members of the government. They will have enough food to eat and plain housing supplied by the state but are not entitled to luxurious housing of their own. The former Portuguese governor's palace in Dili will become a cultural center or hospital.

We don't advocate a return to primitive ways; but, if I am an engineer, I have to work in a proper place but with no unnecessary luxuries, no special privileges. If I need a car to get to my workplace, I can use one, but after work the car returns to the garage.

We explain these decisions to the people; they will remember after liberation. If the leadership falls short, the people will know that they are corrupted with power.

Over 100,000 people have already been killed; women and children die every day for our country. They follow the leaders. If, after liberation, the leaders start driving a Mercedes in the capital, live in nice houses, or wear nice shoes while thousands of people are still recovering from the wounds of war, this will be an outrage. But only when the people are educated and mobilized can they prevent this from happening.

Battlefront Report

LSM: WHAT IS THE PRESENT STAGE OF THE ARMED STRUGGLE? DO YOU STILL USE GUERRILLA TACTICS? HOW MUCH TERRITORY DO YOU CONTROL?

HORTA: We can report, with figures confirmed by the Indonesians, that about 90% of the population live in our liberated areas. You must understand that the majority of our people are subsistence farmers who never lived in urban centers. The city names on the map are just small concentrations of a few thousand people at most. During peacetime the people would come to the towns only for marketing.

East Timor is a mostly mountainous country with peaks over 10,000 feet high. The entire territory controlled by FRETILIN

amounts to about 85% of the country. The Indonesians, for instance, control the town of Maubisse but don't go out more than one or two miles from there. They control Dili, the capital, but not the surrounding villages. From Liquiça to Dili, both of which are on the coast, they cannot move by land, they have to take a helicopter or travel by boat.

In general we use small guerrilla groups. But sometimes we are able to put columns of 100 to 500 fighters into the field. These larger units are becoming more standard. We have a well-trained, mobile army of 15,000 which operates throughout the country.

We also have a people's militia, between 20,000 and 30,000, not so well-equipped. They use World War II rifles, mausers, and even some World War I rifles.

LSM: IS DILI UNDER SIEGE?

HORTA: Our forces attack Dili regularly but it's hit-and-run. They have been able to destroy tanks inside the town. In fact one of our best military commanders was recently killed in a six-hour battle in Dili. But our strategy is first to have complete control of the countryside, better weapons, operating schools and production; then we will have the final assault.

We have to be sure that once we attack Dili, we can hold it. The city is in a narrow valley surrounded by mountains on three sides. The Indonesians can escape only by sea. If they do not escape or surrender, they must be annihilated. This is some time off, but not very long. Once we have better equipment, a good group of saboteurs ....

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East Timor Action Note

For more information and to find out how you can support the East Timor independence struggle and FRETILIN, contact the East Timor Defense Committee, P. O. Box 251, Old Chelsea Station, New York, NY 10010.

East Timor: The Hidden War

by Richard Franke. Describes FRETILIN's (Revolutionary Front for the Independence of East Timor) war against Portuguese and Indonesian colonial domination. East Timor Defense Committee, 1976. $1.50(postpaid)